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Stephen R Lawhead

Interview with author Stephen R Lawhead

Stephen Lawhead is an internationally acclaimed author of mythic history and imaginative fiction. He was born in 1950, in Nebraska in the USA. His early life was lived in America where he earned a university degree in Fine Arts and attended theological seminary for two years. His first professional writing was done at *Campus Life* magazine in Chicago, where he was an editor and staff writer.

After a brief and highly unsuccessful foray into the music business (as president of his own record company) he launched his free-lance career in 1981, writing his first novel, *In the Hall of the Dragon King*. In 1986 the Lawhead family moved to Britain so that Stephen could conduct research for the *Pendragon Cycle* books, settling there permanently in 1990. He is married to Alice Slaikeu Lawhead, with whom he has collaborated on books and articles. They make their home in Oxford, England.

In addition to his twenty-four novels, he has written nine children's books, many of them originally offered to his two sons, Drake and Ross. Stephen has been published in twenty-four foreign languages, has won numerous industry awards, and in 2003 was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters by the University of Nebraska.

Here Stephen talks with Craig Holmes about his career and, in particular, how his Christian faith impacts his work as an author.

What inspired you initially to take up writing?

I had a fling with it through university and found I had a facility for creative writing, and I also just loved reading. I think for a lot of people there comes a point where you've read enough books and you think, 'I'd like to do that.' And then maybe you read a few books and you think, 'Well, *anybody* could do that.' And then you read some more and think, 'I can do better than that!' And so it was a little bit of that naïve self-confidence that maybe allowed me to take up writing.

I had gone to Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago, but started taking other off-campus graduate classes from other schools at night, and one of those classes was in magazine writing. The course was taught by the former publisher of *Christianity Today*, and he invited me to join the staff. He said, 'We're looking for somebody and you seem to be the kind of person we're looking for.' So he put my name forward, and I was hired and spent five happy years there. But the magazine did not do fiction and that was the thing I was keenly interested in and wanted to learn more about. There came a time when I just thought, 'Let's jump in and see what the water is like.' I thought that if it didn't work I could go back to magazine writing and editing. But once you start, it's like riding a bicycle – you have to keep pedalling or you fall off. So I've just been pedalling ever since.

Your latest series of *Bright Empires* novels have been described as ‘genre-bending’, containing aspects of quantum physics, philosophy and cosmology. Could you talk about the influences and motivation behind them?

The explanation is far less interesting than the book itself. That’s the thing with fiction writing – there are all kinds of reasons for writing, all kinds of drives – but in the end it’s only about telling a story that’s worth telling and having other people enjoy it. But I’ve long been a fan of science and physics in particular, which comes out in some of the earlier [science fiction] stories I wrote. I had a taste of physics in High School, even though I knew it had too many numbers in it to suit me. Still, I was really interested in the concepts in it and have followed the major trends in physics ever since. The point is that it has recently become a concern of mine to see that science is being used by many, by atheists mostly, to champion their ideas and give credibility to what are faith issues. But atheists tend to cloak their attacks in science and dress them in scientific pretensions when really it’s nothing of the sort. So the Dawkinses and the Dennetts and the Stengers, and all the rest who are at this game (and the list is long), disguise what are really faith statements in scientific garb either to make them more palatable or to conceal the fact that there really isn’t much of anything there.

But what if we take some of the assumptions that have been put forth by these ‘scientific atheists’ – just take them at face value, but then spin them around to examine them from a different angle. For example: the idea of multiple universes was concocted to get rid of the need for God as a creator – because if every possible universe exists, then it’s logical that the universe we inhabit would exist, so we just happen to be in a universe that supports life as we know it. Okay – so what happens if we accept this multiverse structure, but add in the idea that it is part of the way God designed it and not only is he God of *this* universe but of *every other* universe that might exist as well. The outcome is that God’s role in creation hasn’t actually shrunk, but has expanded. God is actually far, far greater than we have ever imagined.

That’s one idea behind the series. It’s pretty well hidden, in the sense that this is a fictional story and not a treatise on the multiverse theory or scientific atheism. The physics is couched in terms of science fiction, and includes the concept of travel across different dimensions of a multiverse, but wouldn’t you know – God exists in all those other dimensions, too.

The series incorporates not only the scientific but also mystical elements as well...

Yes, that’s right. The key thread here has to do with immortality. One of the locations and time periods we spend time in happens to be early 1600s in Prague during the reign of Emperor Rudolf II [1](#) and his ‘magic court’. He called all the best scientists in the world to Prague, and gave them unlimited funds, lodging and all the support they needed just to carry out their research. The reason they call it the ‘magic court’ is because many of them happened to be alchemists who were working on immortality – that’s what science looked like in those days. There’s also a link with Elizabethan England because Dr John Dee [2](#), also a scientist and physician, went to Prague and spent a few years there. Another place we visit is ancient Egypt, and immortality once again arises as something that they were convinced they had a handle on at that time, and so on. Immortality is a thread that runs through the series. In the first novel of the series, the Skin Map, what’s being sought is actually a map of the multiverse and the treasure it leads to – which the characters think might be immortality.

So your works contain an unashamed appeal to recognize that the scientific method doesn't offer the fullest explanation of reality, that there is more?

Yes, exactly. But it's not a situation where you have to choose either science or religion. In fact some of the scientists in the book are believers because of the order of the universe that they see and because the mechanics of the way things work are too elegant and finely tuned to be the product of anything other than a supremely intelligent creator. So I'm not appealing for people to choose between science or faith. The divide is between those who believe that the universe may have a purpose, that things are working towards that purpose and it's God's will that that purpose should be fulfilled, and those who won't accept this view.

It seems the link in your own mind between your faith and your writing is something quite explicit, even if it's not as clear to your readers.

Absolutely. My books have always had spiritual themes; take, for example, the Celtic series *Song of Albion*. Many people read those books because of a love of the era and its battles and so on. People like a good swashbuckling tale, but many are surprised to learn that at the core of that series is a long meditation on the nature of sovereignty. It occurred to me that Christians are often very good about saying 'Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King,' while singing songs and jumping up and down without ever thinking about what that term 'king' really means. And even if people do think about it, it's a term usually understood by the image of a man sitting on a throne with a gold crown and a sceptre and having minions to run here and there to do his bidding. But that's not it; the classical conception of a king is a person who actually has to provide for his people out of himself. He must make provision for them, either in battle or in times of peace; it is his responsibility to make safety and prosperity for the good of his people. So what does that actually look like? What would that look like in the case of King Arthur, spoken of by many sources as the first Christian king of England? Here's a king who is not only a war leader, but also the provider of peace and prosperity for his people. The Celts' view of kingship was very close to the biblical idea and so lent itself to this meditation on sovereignty.

For me, as a writer, books have really to be about something. It's not just a story, a good tale; there has to be something at the heart of it, something that drives it, that actually informs it. That's how it works for me. So the link between my faith and writing is completely intentional. I remember a book signing at the Greenbelt Festival. I had just finished giving a talk or reading and I noticed that, hanging around at the very end of the event, was this really large guy dressed in black leather, with tattoos on his neck, with chains from his lip to his ear, and I thought, 'Well this could be interesting.' He waited until everyone else had gone and came up and said, 'I want to talk to you about your book.' And I thought, 'Okay...' [nervous laughter] 'Maybe we should talk somewhere else!' But what he actually said was this: 'I read your book and I thought it was so interesting, and it got me thinking. I didn't become a Christian reading it but I began to wonder: What if life could be like that? And then where do you go to get it?' That eventually led him to find a group of Christians and, though he still looked the same – a big scary guy, the meaning snuck up on him.

Another occasion I was being interviewed for one of my science fiction books. The interviewer said, 'I keep noticing, there are all these little spiritual hints and things. Do you do that on purpose?' He couldn't see where it was coming from, but it was tantalizing, interesting, and actually become something more than just part of the story. It was something

that engaged at a different level, and that's what I aim to do. That's always seemed to me to be the natural way to write. As I said, a story has to be about something, and to me the best stories have always been about things that are greater than the person writing them.

So do you see yourself as an evangelist – drawing people to God through the hints you leave in your books?

I would say yes, except for the fact that [in literature] those kinds of words have taken on such a terrible ugly connotation, and it's unfortunate to say it's Christian fiction that's to blame for that. [Evangelistic fiction] is usually so clumsily done, so inelegant in its design and too often it becomes the sole reason for writing. For me that's not it; it's never that way. The spiritual part informs the story but is not the reason for it.

I remember talking to another Christian writer who was very proud of the fact that he was in Christian writing, had been published there to some success, but really wanted to get his work onto the general market. I'm talking about the United States because there the Christian ghetto really exists, and a writer can make a happy living selling only to Christian bookstores and never being published in the general market. So what this particular author decided to do was write one version of his new book for the general market and one version for the Christian market. That struck me as absurd. Gosh. If that's all it is – you write a story and then attach a Christian message at some point then that so-called message cannot ever have any kind of influential bearing on the heart and soul of the story. But there's another kind of book, where the message is woven into the fabric of the story and you cannot simply take it out without ruining the whole cloth, and that's more what I think I do. The message is in the design; it's woven into the whole thing, and if you start pulling a thread here or there then the entire story will come undone.

So the more subtle the message the better?

I do think so. But remember, it is not about me getting a *message* across to readers. I don't write messages, or sermons disguised as stories. For me, it is a question of themes – although I sometimes choose to make the theme more overt. For example, in *Byzantium* I chose to make the main character an Irish monk in the 9th Century, so therefore the issues of faith were front and centre all the time. When I wrote it, pilgrimage was just beginning to be talked about a lot in contemporary Christian circles so I thought, "What did the original pilgrims look like?" They look like the Irish monks of old who went out and basically evangelized all of Europe – scratch a French saint and it's a Celt from Ireland or Wales underneath.

Pilgrimage is an outward physical journey but one with a spiritual point. The purpose wasn't just to go out and wander around; the pilgrimage was for something to happen in your soul in the going, taking your faith with you on that journey to find something deeper, richer. So in the story I thought, rather than going from unbelief to faith, let's go the other way around. I send my Irish monk on a journey that really costs him his faith – but miraculous things happen in a journey like that. The idea is that, as he loses grip on his faith and becomes less sure of the things he was sure of and more filled with doubt, not only does the faith that remains grow stronger because it requires more strength to hold it, but the people round him begin to gain from that experience. He no longer is someone who has all the answers and is so sure; he entertains the doubts and traumas of the weaker vessels and enters into their

sufferings and the people around him respond to that. As his faith begins to ebb, theirs begins to grow and in the end it's them helping him to find the way back again.

Your works sometimes question faith and certainty and often include fantastical or mystical elements. Do you ever worry about how what you'r writing might be perceived by the Church?

Most of my readers don't know me primarily as a Christian author, since I've mostly been published by general market publishing houses. But most of the criticism I get, most of the 'shock, horror' letters I get, come from people who have grown up on more gentle, meek and mild sorts of fiction where everything is okay by the end of the book. My stories are a little bit more edgy, some would say darker, because I tend not to sanitize, apologise, or explain.

I did a whole trilogy on the Crusades, where again the issues of faith are right up front, because these were, ostensibly, wars of faith. People were surprised that I didn't write in such great, glowing terms about the Christians involved, but the sad fact is that it was a pretty dark hour for them. What I set out to do was just to tell it like it was and not to revise it. Privately you and I might agree, 'Yes, they probably shouldn't have done that,' or 'that was wrong and could have been better if they'd done this other thing instead.' But I didn't change what happened; it wasn't up to me to decide what they *should* have done. I just told what happened, and even then I didn't even tell the full extent of it because some of it was just too horrible. That series has since gone on to be published in Turkey and other Arabic countries, where it's been taken up because it's not revisionist. It doesn't paint the Arabs in a particularly bad light (though it doesn't paint them in a good light either). I'm not revisionist, and I'm not taking cheap shots at anybody.

And the mystical or magic?

There are also always people who have trouble with the magical component of the fantasy I write. I wrote a book called *Merlin* and they don't like it because it's 'Merlin the Magician', white beard, pointy hat, and so they make a judgment on what they think might be in the book even though they haven't read it. It's just a knee-jerk reaction. Most people who read my books don't have a problem with it.

Oddly, people will complain about magic, but not violence. The Crusade books are quite violent, and I don't pull many punches there, but I don't receive any howls of outrage over it. But let a character in a tight spot utter the 'D' word – or somebody calls a baddie a 'bastard' or something like that, and that always sends a great shock through people of a more sensitive nature. There are howls about that. It's not because they don't encounter those words in other contexts. For example, if you watch TV after 9 o'clock you'll hear *everything* in terms of foul language. [People seem to think,] 'That's okay for the mainstream, but when I go to a Christian book I want it to be completely sanitized, I want it to be an alternative to the mainstream, and so it has to be seen to be something quite different.' And so when the line is blurred it makes people uncomfortable, and I suppose that's why they object. Another way of looking at it is that these stories are making people think and maybe there's resistance to that. But if you only ever read books you agree with, where you know what's going to happen before you even start, why even bother?

As a Christian and a writer is there anything you would consider 'out of bounds' in terms of content or subject matter?

Yes and no. On one hand I've always been a big believer that an artist needs all the colours on the palette, and if you right away begin subtracting colours – say, you can't use black and you cannot use this colour blue, or brown – then right away you've already narrowed the boundaries of what is possible for that painting. As an artist I like to nurture the idea that anything is possible. So that's the 'no' part – nothing is 'out of bounds.' As for the 'yes' part: for myself, I would be really very uncomfortable working with certain themes and certain ideas that, even though they might have some importance, either I have no interest in them, or there's nothing to be said that would advance goodness, beauty and truth. That's part of my reason for writing – to advance the ideas of goodness, beauty, and truth in the world. For example, writing a novel with a storyline about incest – I just can't imagine myself thinking that would be a good idea. So, practically, there are certain things I wouldn't attempt, but I like to hold the door open to the notion that anything is possible, which is true before you start a tale, before you've written that first sentence.

Is the process of literary creation itself an expression of your faith?

I don't usually think of that in that way, although I certainly know what you mean. Some people will speak directly to that, but I never felt like I needed to write to express my faith because, really, who cares? And I have other ways to express my creativity. I paint; I studied art at university as my major, so as a means of expression writing is just one of several that I might do, but it's also the one that commercially is viable, so that's what I pursue full-time.

Having said that, I do believe that writing is a moral act because it requires a constant stream of decision-making; for example, to choose this scene or another, this word and not another. Okay, why not that word but this word? Well, because this word has connotations I want and that one doesn't. So just the act of discrimination, word by word, making all those decisions again and again, has to be based on something. Those decisions are taken on the worldview, spiritual or otherwise, of the writer. A writer or artist can only create out of who they are. Artists can only explore the goodness, beauty, and truth of human existence from out of their own experience and understanding, from out of their own selves. That's why I say writing is a moral act.

For me, the spiritual theme of the story is also important because then I can test a story scene against the theme as I write, sort of hold the scene up to the theme and ask, 'Does this scene advance the theme of, say, sovereignty? Does this scene advance it, explain it, does it somehow contribute to our understanding of that theme?' Now, if those themes are moral or spiritual, then what flows from them will be as well.

You talk about writing as a moral act, which implies the meaning of your works very much lie with your intention as an author. Would you agree with that?

Again, yes and no. The only thing I can control in the process is the intention to tell a good story, for it not only to be entertaining but to do the really hard work of real entertainment, which often is trivialized in our culture. I've often said in other interviews that I'm an entertainer, but entertainment can do much more than it's usually called on to do. It can ennoble, it can lift you up, it can inform, it can inspire, it can challenge, it can do many, many

more things than it's usually called on to do, which is all too often merely to fill a few empty hours.

What actually happens in the story, that is what I can control. But there's a whole other level that I can't control because I don't know where the readers are personally – in their heads, in their hearts – as they're encountering the story. There's also the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of God, in this process. I get letters from people all the time, and they tell me of something important in the book that spoke to them and got them thinking about God in a different way, or informed their faith, or got them through a hard time. I get lots of those letters, and I just scratch my head and think, 'Well, gosh, that's great,' because, often what they cite wasn't anything I particularly intended. It was something between them and God, a situation God was able to speak into using that story, or simply using that particular phrase in the book. It's very little to do with me because I wrote the book eight years ago in Britain, and they read it just last week in Texas. Still, the story is very much a live thing for them – and it is funny how things can often take on a life of their own. In that sense [stories] are kind of like children; you raise them up in the way they should go and you hope for the best. But when they go out to do their work in the world you're not really involved any more.

So does that reflection on your work in writing and the Spirit's work in people's lives influence the way you read scripture?

If nothing else it reminds me of just one of the ways the Spirit works, and maybe works best. In reading Scripture you have a natural point of entry for the Spirit to speak to you. We're all People of the Book – books obviously serve an important function in our culture and society. The written word is not the only way God works, of course, but it's a pretty good one.

In generations past the stories of Scripture would have been known to most people, which is no longer the case. Do you think...

Oh that is definitely *not* the case, it's not the case at all, and it's really sad. My wife and I were at the Academy in Florence, [3](#) where Michelangelo's David resides. We'd been there several times before, so this time we thought all we'd do is just go in and sit down for ten minutes and look at that statue quietly and then go – nothing else. (Sometimes we'll just do that at other galleries too – part of a 'less is more' museum campaign.) So we're happily sitting there when a lady with a party of school children came up. She saw us sitting there and she came over and asked me, 'Who is that?' I said, 'It's David, but before he's king. He's still a shepherd boy – he's got his sling and he's going to go and slay Goliath.' And she looked at me like, 'Are you making this up?' So I said, 'You know – David, from the Bible? He killed Goliath with his slingshot.' But she clearly had no idea; it was completely off her radar, and so I found myself telling her the story of David and Goliath so that she could then go and tell the kids. I don't know why they were even at the museum, really, and having got there they didn't have a clue as to what they were actually seeing. I took that as a real eye opener: people have lost touch with their cultural heritage.

So bearing that in mind, do you think contemporary fiction can fill the hole left by that ignorance, can provide an arena for thought and discussion about matters of faith?

Yes, but I think the place that you start from is going to have to change quite a lot. You can no longer assume a common ground of biblical stories. We had a 'wake-up call' experience

once in Russia doing a writing seminar for some Russian writers. It was just before the wall came down, so the new enlightenment hadn't fully arrived yet, but it was coming and you could sort of feel it. These were Christian writers that were wanting to gear up for the change that they felt was coming, and they were right – it came within about six months of our being there. We knew some Russian literature, but we also knew that a lot of it would not have been available to them. We figured we would know more about Dostoevsky and Tolstoy than they would, and we were right. So we decided just to stick to Bible stories in terms of a common ground when talking about storytelling. We thought, 'They're Christians, we're Christians – we have the Bible in common.' But even that was an assumption that didn't track. Even as Christians, they hadn't been allowed to read most of the stories we were using as examples. [Similarly in today's society], you have to have a different orientation to your discussion, and you simply can't use some of the allusions that may once have been held in common.

One of the things the Church seems to be getting better at is engaging constructively with literature and film. Is that something you would like to see encouraged more?

No, because we're great ones for talking a thing to death. You can get money to start a new chair in theology and film, you can convene conferences and issue papers and do all that kind of stuff, and we'll talk to one another endlessly about it. But what I'd like to see is more of people just rolling up their sleeves and [creating literature or film]. It can be done; I'm doing it with books, and I'm sure there are film people out there that can just do it. In other words, quit studying it and let's just do some, and then the discussions can flow out of that.

So is that something of which you think we're all capable?

What comes to mind is this old idea of the force and the field. It's the idea that the Church at large can be seen as either a force or a field. It's either a field into which you bring people, where they become acculturated, acclimatized by virtue of being with you in your field. Another kind of church is more of a force, where it's out there 'doing' – it's energy, it's moving, it's engaging, it's doing all kind of things, but it's not requiring anyone to come and be part of it. It's elusive, it's subtle, it's a force.

My tendency as a writer is to be more a part of that force. There are other writers who are really good at being part of the field, and that's good too. But I want to be out there creating some kind of kinetic energy for the cause. I'm not saying we have to choose between the two, but it helps if you can identify what you are and go for that.

I've a friend who is a really fantastic best-selling writer, and he looks at me and says, 'Fiction? I just don't know how you do it.' So I say, 'Don't you ever just think in terms of stories?' To which the answer is, 'No, never.' He'll write stories as they come to him from experience, his own experience or from people he might interview, but to create something as a piece of fiction doesn't occur to him. But he also knows, I think, that his main area is working the field, working in among Christians who need that kind of reassurance and comfort and enlightenment, and those are the kinds of things he can bring. I'm happy to have my books sold in Scripture Union bookstores sometimes, but more I see my role as being in Waterstones. That's where the force is.

Identify where your strongest gift lies and do that. Most pastors are probably pretty gifted as workers in the field, but a few of them maybe should be out being a force.



Stephen R Lawhead's latest book, *The Spirit Well*, part of the *Bright Empires* series, is available now. For more information visit stephenlawhead.com.

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Endnotes

[1](#) 1552-1612

[2](#) 1527-1608

[3](#) Accademia di Belle Arti